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While Congress took its traditional August break from legislative activity, time continued to tick away on our ability to pass the U.S.-Colombia fair trade agreement. This agreement, crucial to ensuring that American business and workers have a level playing field within Colombian markets, is a victim of a dangerous precedent set in April when the Democratic Majority ignored a May 2007 bipartisan agreement and 34 years of bipartisan trade policy by stripping this agreement of its right to a guaranteed vote in the House.

Without a vote in the House during the remaining few days of the 110th Congress, this agreement, carefully crafted to benefit U.S. workers, will fade away. Trade Promotion Authority (TPA) protections ensure that an agreement will receive an up or down vote without amendment, but only if Congress passes the necessary implementing legislation during the same Congress in which it is introduced. In other words, if Congress doesn't approve the Colombia agreement by this Congress' quickly-approaching adjournment, TPA's remaining essential protection against amendments and guarantee of a vote in the Senate will be forfeited.

The United States and Colombia would be back to square one, representing a serious setback for U.S. workers and prolonging the fundamental unfairness that U.S. manufacturers and producers face in our trading relationship with Colombia.

Despite much-repeated myths, trade benefits U.S. workers, manufacturers, and small businesses. For example, the U.S.-Central America-Dominican Republic Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) eliminated our trade deficit of \$1.9 billion with these countries.

Within two years after the passage of CAFTA, we had a \$3.7 billion trade surplus.

The independent U.S. International Trade Commission estimates that the U.S.-Colombia agreement would have a similar impact and would increase U.S. exports to Colombia by \$1.1 billion once the agreement is fully implemented.

As of June 2008, the United States went from a trade deficit to a trade surplus of \$6.6 billion dollars in manufactured goods trade with our FTA partner countries. These agreements clearly benefit America. Turning our backs on these benefits, as the majority threatens to do, is irresponsible and only hurts the long-term growth of our economy.

This isolationist attitude did not always exist within the Democratic Party. In 1962, President Kennedy powerfully articulated the far-reaching benefits of trade. He urged the United States to lead the free world in embracing open markets, declaring, "Economic isolation and political leadership are wholly incompatible." Unfortunately, Speaker Pelosi has ignored President Kennedy's philosophy.

Instead, Congress is playing political games with America's relationship with an important ally in a troubled region.

The rhetoric from Senator Obama's campaign shows that he is tapping into the same fears and bowing to the special interests of Big Labor.

However, many within the Democratic Party disagree and have warned about the adverse effects of walking away from fair trade agreements.

A year ago, forty-three former Democratic Members of Congress, Cabinet Officials, Ambassadors, and foreign and trade policy advisors wrote to Speaker Pelosi urging a vote on then-pending trade agreements with Colombia, Peru, and Panama.

To date, only Peru has received a vote.

That letter was unequivocal:

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As Democrats, we fully recognize that asking the U.S. Congress to vote on these trade agreements is politically charged.

Nonetheless, rejecting these agreements would set back regional U.S. interests for a generation.”

These agreements not only supply tremendous economic benefits to American workers, but they increase our geopolitical partnerships as well.

By walking away from the U.S.-Colombian fair trade agreement, we will send a signal to Latin America that the United States cannot be relied upon on the global stage.

America does not have the luxury of the status quo. Other countries are moving ahead to conclude agreements that would give their workers and businesses a competitive advantage over ours. Canada recently signed a trade agreement with Colombia, and the EU is negotiating its own agreement with Colombia. That means that Colombia will buy tractors, mining equipment, and fertilizer from Canada, France, and Germany instead of from Illinois, Georgia, and Texas. Without a U.S.-Colombia agreement, American farmers will remain at a disadvantage.

In Colombia our farmers currently face an average tariff of 20%. The fair trade agreement would make 93% of American agricultural exports to Colombia duty free within ten years, which would increase our farm exports by nearly \$700 million annually.

Though the Speaker has set a dangerous precedent, one that threatens the competitiveness of American workers, there is still time for positive action. She can correct her mistake if she allows a vote before Congress adjourns.

Congress must reverse its isolationist course by taking action on fair trade agreements with Colombia. Denying this agreement an up or down vote would condemn U.S. workers, families, and employers to a back seat as the global economy expands. We cannot allow this to happen. Trade agreements are necessary to maintain the United States' leadership role in the global economy.

As a long-term advocate of global fair trade, I urge my fellow members of the House to push for an immediate vote on the U.S.-Colombia fair trade agreement.